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ABSTRACT

This study examines counselor characteristics, especially how the characteristics factor into the helping relationship. Prior research on this topic has been couched in the social psychology research on personal attraction and relationship development, which suggests that credibility, attractiveness, and influence are functions of the degree of similarity between source and receiver. The purpose of the study was to investigate the similarity and repulsion hypotheses, to discuss the implications for school counselors, and to establish from a representative at-risk high school sample, rank orderings of characteristics desired in counselors. Few studies have been conducted with high school students, and particularly none with high-risk students. The Preferences for School Counselor Characteristics was constructed and administered. Data from the study supported the similarity and revulsion hypotheses. Rank order preferences for counselor characteristics was consistent with previous reports of rankings from minority groups. It concludes that the study may have significance due to the very nature of counseling in the schools. Armed with the knowledge that students may prefer counselors similar to themselves, particularly as related to attitudes and values, the school counselors can begin to understand why some segments of the student body underuse counseling services. (Contains 10 references and two tables.) (JDM)

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At-Risk High School Students' Preferences for Counselor Characteristics

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At-Risk High School Students' Preferences for Counselor Characteristics

The study of counselor characteristics, especially how these characteristics factor into the helping relationship, has been a topic of much interest for more than two decades. At the inception of such studies, the focus was often on the ethnic variable in the counseling dyad to the exclusion of other, possibly more salient counselor attributes (Atkinson, Wampold, Lowe, Mathews, & Ahn, 1998). Beginning with Atkinson, Furlong, and Poston, (1986), however, other within-group variables such as age, gender, and attitudes and values have been included.

Regardless of the variables under study, investigations have been couched, either implicitly or explicitly in the social psychology research on personal attraction and relationship development, suggesting among other things, that credibility, attractiveness, and influence are functions of the degree of similarity between source and receiver (cf. Simons, Berkowitz, and Moyer, 1970; Speight & Vera, 1997).

Perhaps five studies best inform the present research in that they represent efforts to demonstrate that characteristics other than ethnicity should be considered in the definition of similarity. Atkinson, Furlong, and Poston (1986) represents the first time in which methodology similar to the present study was utilized. In that study, the authors reported that African-American participants ranked ethnic similarity fifth in comparison to other counselor characteristics such as education, attitudes and values, personality, sex, socioeconomic status, age, and religion. In a replication and extension of Atkinson, et al. (1986), Ponterotto, Alexander, and Hinkston (1988) concluded that counselor ethnicity ranked second compared to the same counselor variables. They presented a possible explanation of the difference in rankings as a function of the variance between each respective sample's culture and environment, but arrived at the same general conclusion as Atkinson et al. (1986), that the participants preferred counselors similar to themselves. Atkinson, Poston, Furlong, and Mercado (1989), using similar methods, namely, a paired comparison format, found that Asian American and European American participants ranked counselor ethnicity seventh and Mexican American participants ranked counselor ethnicity sixth among the previously identified counselor characteristics. The fourth study from which pertinent precedent is drawn (Bennett & BigFoot-Sipes, 1991) reported that American Indian participants ranked counselor ethnicity second for academic problems, and fourth for personal problems. BigFoot-Sipes, Dauphinais, LaFromboise, Bennett, and Rowe (1992) replicated the study with Native American Junior High and High School students and found that same ethnicity ranked higher in their sample than in other research conducted with college students. The general conclusions derived from each of these studies collectively support the hypothesis that participants of various races and ethnicities prefer counselors similar to them.

It would seem that much support has been garnered for the similarity and revulsion hypotheses as it applies to the characteristics deemed desirable in a counselor. So much so, in fact, that the wisdom of yet another study might be questioned. Few studies have been conducted with high school students as participants, none particularly with at-risk high school students, and none which examined the student -- school counselor relationship. The justification of the present study lies in the uniqueness of the participants and the questionable generalizations to high school students to be made from Atkinson, et al. (1986), Ponterotto, et al. (1988), Atkinson, et al. (1989), and Bennett & BigFoot-Sipes (1991), all of which utilized participants from populations

drawn from college or community college environments. Only one study of preferred counselor characteristics (BigFoot-Sipes, et al., 1992) has been conducted using high school students and methodology similar to the present study. In no case, however, were the participants identified as those students who, because of some special characteristic, would be expected to use counseling services more frequently than their peers. Participants in the present study were selected based on the group characteristic of being "at-risk" in that they had already been removed from the typical high school population and had been admitted to an alternative high school designed to serve students with special needs. In essence, the present sample was constructed of students especially representative of a particular population of high school students, who because of their propensity for crises, are often over represented on the school counselors' caseload.

The purpose of the present study then, was to investigate the similarity and repulsion hypotheses, to discuss the implications for school counselors, and to establish, from a representative at risk high school sample, rank orderings of characteristics desired in counselors.

Method

Participants

Forty-one percent of the participants (n = 27) were male and 59% (n = 39) were female students enrolled in a public charter high school in the southern United States. The high school's charter was granted on the basis of its mission to serve "at-risk" students. Of the 66 participants, 73% (n = 48) were self-identified as White or Caucasian, 21% (n = 14) as African-American or Black, 4.5% (n = 3) as Hispanic or Mexican, and 1.5% (n = 1) as Asian-American. Participants ranged in age from 15 to 20 years with a mean age of 17.2 years. As indicated, the students enrolled in the school had been determined to be "at risk" for failure in traditional schools and had consequently been referred to the alternative charter school for appropriate services. Of the sample, 77% (n = 51) reported that they had used counseling services in the past. Descriptive statistics for the sample are summarized in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 About Here

Measures

The Preferences for School Counselor Characteristics was constructed and administered to the sample. The instrument was designed as an exhaustive measure of students' expressed preference for several salient counselor characteristics. Participants were asked to choose between two counselors, differing only on two given counselor characteristics. The counselor characteristics under consideration consisted of similar or different attitudes and values, same or opposite sex, same or different race, and similar or different background and socioeconomic status. The eight counselor characteristics were presented in a complete forced choice, paired comparison format which produced a total of 28 [(8 x 7)/2] forced choice items. This facilitated the pairing of each characteristic with each of the other characteristics one time. It should be noted that contrary to other studies using similar methodology (Atkinson, et al., 1986; Atkinson, et al., 1989; Bennett & BigFoot-Sipes, 1991; Ponterotto, et al., 1988), the characteristics, "older", "younger", "more educated", and "less educated" were eliminated. Given that the participants in the present study were high school students, it goes without saying that any counselor with whom they come into contact in the school setting would necessarily be older and

would have more education than they. Including these variables would have yielded no meaningful data. A section of the instrument was designed to ascertain demographic information such as age, sex, and race. Finally, participants responded to a question asking if they had ever used counseling services.

Procedure

Four graduate students assisted in the administration of the instrument. Each student was assigned a classroom at the school in which to administer the instrument and was given a standard set of instructions for the administration of the questionnaire. All participants completed the needs assessment, including the Preferences for School Counselor Characteristics instrument, in less than 30 minutes. The first author is program coordinator and university liaison for the establishment of the charter school as a professional development site for school counseling. The second author is one of the graduate students, all of whom were enrolled in a pre-practicum course taught by the first author. The questionnaire was included among other needs assessment instruments administered to collect data necessary in the first steps of developing a comprehensive school counseling program at the school. A total of 66 students were given questionnaires. Of the total, two questionnaires were excluded from the analysis because they were incomplete. The questionnaires were scored by hand with the assistance of members of the research team who collected the data and The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) was used to process and analyze the data. When scored, the questionnaires yielded eight preference scores, one for each characteristic. The four preference for similarity scores taken together constituted the individual's total preference for similarity score and the four preference for difference scores taken together constituted the individual's total preference for difference score.

Three hypotheses were tested. The first, that the data would support the similarity and revulsion hypotheses as evidenced by participants' preference for similarity scores being significantly higher than their preference for difference scores, was tested with a dependent samples t-test. In the analysis, preference for similarity scores and preference for difference scores were paired. The second hypothesis, that the participants would rank counselor characteristics in a manner consistent with samples from the extant literature, was tested by visual inspection. Finally, the third hypothesis, that preferences would vary significantly by race and sex, was tested utilizing MANOVA and follow-up univariate analyses.

Results

Descriptive statistics (age, sex, and racial composition) of participants are reported in Table 1. Mean selection frequencies and standard deviations of the eight counselor characteristics under consideration, along with rankings, are reported in Table 2.

The primary purpose of the analysis was to determine if the present data support the attraction and repulsion hypotheses and to elaborate upon statistically significant differences among mean selection frequencies. To address the main question, a paired samples t-test was conducted to determine if the mean preference for similarity score ($\underline{M}$ = 17.56; $\underline{SD}$ = 3.52) was significantly different from the mean preference for difference score ($\underline{M}$ = 10.47; $\underline{SD}$ = 3.54). The $\underline{t}$-test, $\underline{t}(65) = 8.18$, $\underline{p} < .05$, indicated that a statistically significant difference existed between participants' expressed preference for counselors with similar characteristics as themselves and expressed preference for counselors with different characteristics than themselves. Examination of

cell means revealed that the data support much of the research in that preference for similarity scores were significantly higher than preference for difference scores.

The order in which students indicated preferences for counselor characteristics was determined by ranking the mean selection frequencies of the eight characteristics under consideration (see Table 2). Highest ranked characteristics were Same Attitudes and Values and Same Background and Socioeconomic Status. Lowest ranked characteristics were Different Attitudes and Values and Different Race.

Insert Table 2 About Here

A comparison of mean selection frequencies was done with a 2 (Sex) x 2 (Race) MANOVA using the eight counselor characteristics as dependent variables. MANOVA results indicated no significant multivariate effects for any interaction terms. A result of no statistically significant difference in this instance indicated that the analysis of the present data by race and sex offered little or no practical information to a discussion of real differences. A statistically significant univariate effect for sex, $F(1,58) = 4.50$, $p < .05$ on expressed preference for same sex counselors was indicated but the concomitant effect size was minimal ($\eta^2 = .07$) . This indicates that females in the sample expressed statistically but not substantively higher preference for female counselors.

Univariate analysis further indicated an effect for race, $F(1,58) = 5.58$, $p < .05$ on expressed preference for opposite sex counselors, and an effect for race $F(1,58) = 5.09$, $p < .05$ on expressed preference for same sex counselors. Concomitant effect sizes, $\eta^2 = .09$ and $\eta^2 = .08$, respectively, were negligible. Visual inspection of mean selection frequencies of African Americans and Whites indicated that African Americans expressed statistically but not substantively higher preference for same sex counselors and Whites expressed statistically but not substantively higher preferences for opposite sex counselors.

One ancillary result warranting report is the unusually high frequency of previous use of counseling services reported by the present sample. Seventy-seven percent reported that they had used counseling services in the past. This rate is substantially higher than the reported use of counseling services by other groups of adolescents (cf. Esters, Cooker, & Ittenbach, 1998; Offer, Schonert, & Ostrov, 1991).

Discussion

The results of the present study are consistent with the findings of similar studies involving various minority groups' preferences for counselor characteristics. The extant literature indicates that, if given the choice, participants seeking counseling preferred to see a counselor who was similar to them. Studies of African American, Asian American, Hispanic Americans, and Native Americans have yielded consistently similar results and, as suggested in the present study, at-risk students are no exception. It would appear that issues of similarity and difference are integral to the understanding of every counseling relationship, not just to those labeled "multicultural."

The results should be considered in light of several shortcomings in the design of the present study. First, unlike previous studies, the type of problem for which the participants were to hypothetically seek counseling (personal or academic) was not considered. It may well be that if given consideration, analysis of this variable would have produced markedly different results. In

fact, given the results of previous studies, one would expect rankings of characteristics to be different depending on problem type. In similar fashion, the within--group variable, "commitment to own culture" was excluded.

Another limitation is that only 66 participants were surveyed. Within that 66, a disproportionate amount were European Americans ($n = 48$). The only other racial group with enough members to warrant analysis was African American ($n = 14$). In light of the racial imbalance, readers are encouraged to interpret any result in which race was a variable with extreme caution. Finally, the forced choice methodology itself has limitations. Forcing the participant to choose between two characteristics reflects preference determined under conditions that hold all other factors equal-- a condition that does not exist in the real world.

Three hypotheses were explored in the present study. The first, that the data would support the similarity and revulsion hypotheses, was accepted. Total preference for similarity scores were statistically significantly higher than total preference for difference scores. This result is consistent with the social psychology research cited earlier which indicates that similarity is a factor in relationship development. Rank ordered preferences for counselor characteristics were as follows: (1) same attitudes and values, (2) same background and SES, (3) same sex, (4) same race, (5) opposite sex, (6) different background and SES, (7) different race, and (8) different attitudes and values. This ranking was consistent with previous reports of rankings from minority groups, with the only noteworthy difference being the relatively lower placement of same ethnicity in the present study.

If one considers the results of the first two tests of hypotheses -- a demonstrated preference for similarity and the ranking of same attitudes and values, and same background and SES as the top preferred counselor characteristics, it will become clear that this sample looked beyond race to identify the counselors they consider similar to them. In other words, participants in the present study consider counselors with same attitudes and values, and same background and SES to take precedence over a same race counselor. This may be because shared attitudes and values and a similar background and SES are more prominent characteristics of similarity than race. After all, a counselor who shares a student's attitudes and values and a similar background and SES will, by most definitions of culture, share more of the culture than a counselor who is simply a member of the same race.

The finding of no significant difference for the MANOVA does not suggest that the participants' preference scores should be analyzed by race and sex. In other words, an analysis by sex and race would have added very little, if any, valuable information to the discussion. Nevertheless, univariate analyses did indicate some statistically significant but substantively insignificant differences. Those differences should be considered very cautiously.

As for school counselors, the present study may have special significance due to the very nature of counseling in the schools. Schools are microcosms of society, a society that is increasingly multicultural. But unlike counselors in private practice, in the school, the counselor must serve 100% of the students, regardless of similarities or differences between students and counselor. Armed with the knowledge that students may prefer counselors similar to themselves, particularly as related to attitudes and values, the school counselor can begin to understand why some segments of the student body underuse counseling services. This understanding should lead to the provision of counseling services available and desirable to all students.

Several suggestions for future research are precipitated by the present study. As more evidence in support of the similarity and repulsion hypotheses in counseling research mounts, researchers should be encouraged to design studies which examine the applicability of similarity and preference for characteristics specifically to counseling relationships. It may also prove fruitful to conduct these studies so that high school aged participants are represented and differentiated from college aged participants. Another area of possible study is to determine the relative effects of similarity and difference variables on the counseling relationship. Some similarity and differences may be more important than others to the extent that one difference judged by the client to be extremely important renders an otherwise similar counselor therapeutically impotent. Research should also focus on the behaviors counselors can exhibit which might make them more palatable to a diverse clientele.

The present study examined at-risk students' preferences for counselor characteristics. The results suggest that school counselors should be sensitive to this aspect of student dynamics in order to better serve all students. Further, due to the most preferred characteristics of the participants, counselors need not disqualify themselves based on differences in race or ethnicity as readily as they may have once done.

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Table 1.
Means and Standard Deviations, and Frequencies for Age, Sex and Race of the Sample.

Variable	Frequency	% of Total
Age (Mean = 17.2; SD = 1.2)		
15	3	4.5%
16	18	27.3%
17	23	34.8%
18	13	19.7%
19	5	7.6%
20	4	6.1%
Sex		
Male	27	40.9%
Female	39	59.1%
Race (self-described)		
White, Caucasian	48	72.7%
Black, African-American	14	21.2%
Hispanic, Mexican	3	4.5%
Asian-American	1	1.5%

Table 2.
Means, Standard Deviations, and Rank Order of Eight Counselor Characteristics

Counselor Characteristic	Rank	M	SD
Same Attitudes and Values	1	5.42	1.54
Same Background and SES	2	4.52	1.68
Same Sex	3	4.24	1.91
Same Race	4	3.38	1.83
Opposite Sex	5	3.14	2.18
Different Background and SES	6	2.79	1.34
Different Race	7	2.29	1.62
Different Attitudes and Values	8	2.26	1.72